The First Signs: Unlocking the Mysteries of the World's Oldest Symbols

By Genevieve von Petzinger

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Imagine yourself as a caveman or woman. The place: Europe. The time: 25,000 years ago, the last Ice Age. In reality, you live in an open-air tent or a bone hut. But you also belong to a rich culture that creates art. In and around your cave paintings are handprints and dots, x's and triangles, parallel lines and spirals. Your people know what they mean. You also use them on tools and jewelry. And then you vanish—and with you, their meanings.

Join renowned archaeologist Genevieve von Petzinger on an Indiana Jones-worthy adventure from the open-air rock art sites of northern Portugal to the dark depths of a remote cave in Spain that can only be reached by sliding face-first through the mud. Von Petzinger looks past the beautiful horses, powerful bison, graceful ibex, and faceless humans in the ancient paintings. Instead, she's obsessed with the abstract geometric images that accompany them, the terse symbols that appear more often than any other kinds of figures—signs that have never really been studied or explained until now.

Part travel journal, part popular science, part personal narrative, von Petzinger's groundbreaking book starts to crack the code on the first form of graphic communication. It's in her blood, as this talented scientist's grandmother served as a code-breaker at Bletchley. Discernible patterns emerge that point to abstract thought and expression, and for the first time, we can begin to understand the changes that might have been happening inside the minds of our Ice Age ancestors—offering a glimpse of when *they* became *us.*

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Editorial Review

Review
"The fundamental elements of the art of the Upper Paleolithic remained essentially unchanged for at least 20,000 years, five times the chronological distance that separates us from the builders of the Great Pyramids at Giza. For generations scholars have attempted to understand this slow unfolding of consciousness, this primordial flash of the human spirit that ultimately led to the creation of culture. Genevieve von Petzinger reveals that, beyond the figurative art, the iconic images of horses and bison so transcendent in their beauty, are 32 signs that may represent a vocabulary written literally in stone, symbols that offer an opening into the Paleolithic mind. This may represent one of the most extraordinary scientific insights of our time." (Wade Davis, author of The Serpent and the Rainbow *Professor of Anthropology Faculty Associate, University of British Columbia*)

"If you love mysteries, you'll love this book. Archaeologist von Petzinger acts as guide and sleuth in this fascinating, accessible, and fast-paced exploration of Ice Age artists and the evocative cave paintings they left behind. You'll feel as if you're with her as she plunges into caverns to examine the ancient and exquisite depictions of horses, mammoths, and bison. And you'll puzzle with her over the strange, abstract symbols the artists often painted alongside the animals. Scientists have long debated these images. Now, von Petzinger offers a new way to think about why our distant relatives created this art, and what it means. You'll come away with a deeper appreciation for these great artists, their love of animals and the natural world, and their connection to us." (Virginia Morell, author of Animal Wise and Ancestral Passions.)

“Few mysteries intrigue more than what the numerous abstract symbols they inscribed on cave walls actually meant to the gifted artists of the last Ice Age. In this wonder-filled book Genevieve von Petzinger takes us tens of thousands of years back in time, and to some stunningly beautiful sites, in a fascinating attempt to penetrate the psyches of those ancient people.” (Ian Tattersall, author of The Strange Case of the Rickety Cossack and Other Cautionary Tales from Human Evolution and Curator of the Spitzer Hall of Human Origins, American Museum of Natural History)

"I enjoyed reading Genevieve von Petzinger’s book *The First Signs: My Quest to Unlock the Mysteries of the World’s Oldest Symbols*. Ms. Von Petzinger has created a fascinating look at signs found in the caves that have not been thought of before. I have been in many of the caves myself and recognized many of the symbols. I thought her analysis of the symbols reflected the intelligence of our ancient ancestors. She has done a remarkable job of analyzing part of the cave art that has never been done in that way before." (Jean Auel, author of the bestselling Earth's Children series)

"My grandmother, Mary Leakey, traced some of the oldest known rock art in Africa, and while my work spans a much earlier time, this is something that I’ve always been curious about. In this fascinating book, Genevieve von Petzinger takes you on a journey through later prehistory, interspersed with personal anecdotes of her exploration, often in muddy tunnels in dark caves in remote corners of Europe. She delves expertly into many of the questions I have often contemplated around the earliest expressions of art, symbols and language, providing us with an extensive exploration of the artists in the mostly European landscape and offering her interpretation of the clues and evidence surrounding the later transition towards fully modern cognition." (Louise Leakey, paleontologist, Director at the Turkana Basin Institute)

"Brings fresh eyes and fascinating theses to the study of ancient rock art... Lively... Linking these systems to

other graphic conventions may eventually yield some sort of Rosetta stone... Anyone who's longed to visit Lascaux or the caves of Cantabria will be eager to read von Petzinger's admirable efforts at cracking the code." (*Kirkus*)

"The author's style adds immensely to the enjoyment of the book. Von Petzinger's findings are significant for comprehending the origins of symbolic thinking... An exceptional read that should capture the imagination of anyone fascinated by time, humanity, and prehistory." (*Library Journal (Starred Review)*)

"Outstanding." (*Ledger-Transcript*)

About the Author
Genevieve von Petzinger studies cave art from the European Ice Age and has built a unique database that holds more than 5,000 signs from almost 400 sites across Europe. Her work has appeared in popular science magazines such as *New Scientists* and *Science Illustrated.* A *National Geographic* Emerging Explorer of 2016, she was a 2011 TED Global Fellow, a 2013-15 TED Senior Fellow and her 2015 TED talk has more than 2 million views.

The First Signs

CHAPTER 1

Two Red Dots

I am standing on the Camino de Santiago, the ancient pilgrimage route in northern Spain. This part of the Camino winds its way along the coast, passing through medieval villages on its way west. In the distance I can see the town of Comillas with its ancient yellow-gray stone buildings, their façades punctuated with vibrant splashes of red from the geraniums in their window boxes.

It’s a blustery day in May of 2013, and white clouds dance across the sky, playing hide-and-seek with the sun. The Cantabrian Sea stretches out in front of me, slate blue topped with little whitecaps; it crashes against the shore below my feet and sprays my face with a delicate, salty mist. The sun breaks through for a moment, and the water becomes a translucent turquoise window, giving me a glimpse of the rocks and white sand beneath the waves.

Two people stride toward me, walking sticks swinging purposefully, their backs slightly bent under the weight of their backpacks. A white scallop shell—the symbol of their sacred quest—hangs from each of their packs, marking them as pilgrims. For over a millennium people have made this spiritual journey to visit what many believe is the final resting place in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, of Saint James from the New Testament.

But I am here on a different kind of pilgrimage. I’m with my husband and project photographer, Dillon, and we have just met up with Gustavo Sanz Palomera, an archaeologist with the Cantabrian government. We are here to explore a cave in the hillside behind us that is supposed to contain Ice Age paintings.

Long before this country was called Spain, people lived in this land. They survived the challenges of an Ice Age world in the relative stability of this region. With its protected river valleys and abundant marine resources, this landscape provided ancient humans with a suitable environment in which to live and thrive. They first settled here over 40,000 years ago and occupied this territory almost continuously until the end of the Ice Age, 30,000 years later.

We know they were here from the evidence they left behind: habitation sites scattered with stone tools and animal bones; human burials including “grave goods” and personal ornaments; and then, of course, there are the caves throughout this region that they decorated with the engravings and paintings that are, in many ways, their greatest legacy.

Art presents us with a window into the minds of these people that other types of artifacts just can’t provide. It offers us glimpses into their world, their culture, and their belief systems; intriguing hints about their level of sophistication in thinking in the abstract and manipulating symbols; and insight into how far along they may have been in the development of graphic communication. While all of the art has this potential, the geometric imagery in particular seems to indicate a high degree of mastery of many of these uniquely human traits. This category of geometric signs is my passion. Sometimes they accompany the other imagery, and at other times they stand on their own. The signs are what I’m here to study.

Dillon and I have spent the last month and a half in France documenting the art at eleven different cave sites, so in some ways today’s excursion feels almost like “another day at the office,” albeit a pretty interesting and ever-changing office. We’ve worked in massive caves with high, curved ceilings that give us the feeling of being in an underground cathedral; we’ve worked in others so narrow in width that photographing the art required contorting ourselves into some very awkward positions; we’ve worked in caves with collapsing floors and caves with steep muddy sections that required very careful maneuvering.

But as I stand there in my hoodie, jeans, and hiking boots, watching Gustavo pull on a full-body waterproof suit and boots, I start to get the impression that my French caving clothes may not be entirely appropriate for this situation.

“I really hate this cave,” Gustavo tells us as he’s getting ready. Dillon and I glance at each other; these are definitely not the words you want to hear before you’ve even entered a site . . . especially when your guide is getting seriously geared up!

“Oh,” I say. “What’s so bad about it?”

“Deep mud and very small,” Gustavo replies with a grimace. He speaks excellent English but I’m hoping in this case that something is being lost in the translation.

We turn our backs on the Camino and the sea to face a lush, overgrown green hillside. As we start to hike up a gravel path, I quickly spot the entrance to La Cueva de El Portillo on our left. The entrance doesn’t seem too bad: a dark split in the hillside that’s about eight feet high, with enough width for us to walk through comfortably. We step over the threshold into a roundish chamber with an even higher ceiling. The chamber is about twenty feet across at its widest point. The floor is pretty muddy, but my hiking boots have seen as much in French caves and survived.

Maybe this isn’t going to be as bad as I thought.

I look around the chamber, my vision adjusting to the gloomy interior. The floor plan I was studying for this

cave earlier in the day showed a passageway continuing quite a bit farther into the hillside, but I don't see any exit from the chamber other than the way we came in. Then, as I scan the solid gray walls, my eyes are drawn to a small opening low down on the back wall. It doesn't even quite come up to my knees. Oh . . .

"Gustavo, is this where we're going?"

"Yes," he replies. "Much of the cave is like that. This is why I hate it."

Huh. I examine the narrow entrance more closely and notice that the passageway angles down sharply, and a small stream of water trickles across the thick muddy surface, its flow splitting to encircle jagged pieces of rock that rise like islands out of the mud as it continues downward into the darkness below. I see no sign of the passage broadening out, either.

Dillon cradles his camera bag protectively and gives me a look. Even big, relatively dry caves can do a number on camera equipment, so having to drag his expensive gear through the conditions that El Portillo has to offer is not something he's exactly thrilled about. We also have two battery-powered 500-watt LED banks of light with us, so I guess we're about to find out how rugged everything really is.

Gustavo leads the way as he slips the lower half of his body into the tight opening and begins to wriggle downward. As he vanishes into the dark, he tells us, "It only goes on like this for about fifteen feet, and then it levels out enough that you can crouch."

He calls up to let us know that he's made it down, then flashes his light on the tight walls of the descending passage, giving me a glimpse of what is to come. I'm pretty sure I can see a spot about halfway down where it gets even tighter.

It's my turn.

I grab hold of a protruding lip of rock above the hole and swing my legs into the opening. My feet search around until I find a rock to brace myself on—I'm not quite vertical, but my angle is much closer to standing than to lying flat. Slithering down into the dark, the mud squelching underneath me, I now understand why Gustavo is wearing a waterproof outfit.

Shimmying down, feeling my way with my feet, I'm now completely inside the narrow passage—my back's against one wall and my face is about six inches from the other. The only sounds I can hear are my own breathing and the quiet trickling of water. A faint glimmer of light reaches me from the entrance chamber above, but other than that, with my body blocking any light Gustavo might be trying to shine up from below, I find myself in complete darkness.

Thank God I'm not claustrophobic.

I work my way down in small increments by pushing my hands off the rock in front of me. I try not to think too much about the weight of stone in the hillside above me. On the upside, at least this region of Spain is not very seismically active.

This type of adventure is a regular part of my job. Moments like this one remind me how lucky I really am. As a paleoanthropologist studying some of the oldest art in the world to better understand why our distant ancestors started to create paintings and engravings in Europe, I have explored many caves just like El Portillo . . . though not often so muddy or so narrow. Still, I love what I do.

After a couple of minutes, I feel a pair of hands grab my feet and guide them onto the cave floor. I turn myself around inside the narrow passageway so I'm looking up. We still need to get our gear down safely. Dillon leans in headfirst, and I boost myself back up until we are within reach of each other to receive the two light banks and a camera bag.

Finally, it's Dillon's turn to descend. With his greater height and previous experience climbing mountains, he manages the descent much more smoothly than me and emerges onto the cave floor almost doing the limbo as he slides his lower half out and to the side to get around the bulge of rock at the mouth of the passage. We have arrived on the main level of El Portillo.

We get to work looking for the geometric signs that are shown on the one and only map that exists for this cave. As with the other rock art sites, there is very little information about El Portillo beyond a one-page description from an independent archaeologist forty years ago and the map I hold in my hand. No one has been back to study this site since 1979, when the archaeologist reported that there was Ice Age art here and made a quick sketch of the cave's floor plan with the locations of images marked simply as "grabados" (engravings) and "restos de figuras" (the rest of the images). His written description of what he found was not much more detailed: one, possibly two, red dots; a crumbling engraving of a quadruped, species unknown; other unidentifiable engravings; several red marks; and the remains of some red signs (no description of their shape). It is the red signs that most interest me. I hope to identify what they are.

Gustavo tells us we are the first people to have requested access since that archaeologist's original discovery. As I stand up to my ankles in a mixture of brownish-red mud veiled by a thin film of water, somehow I'm not surprised. Only a very small group of scholars studies rock art from the Ice Age, and with so many sites to choose from, a site like El Portillo, where only a handful of badly degraded images have been reported, is not likely to be at the top of most of their lists.

But I am interested in all the signs at all the Ice Age sites in Europe. At many of them these mysterious geometric signs outnumber the images of the animals and humans by a ratio of at least two to one. I built a database specifically to study these markings and record the contents of each site. That database now comprises more than 350 Ice Age sites. I use its information to analyze the movement of signs, ideas, and culture, as well as the potential origins of graphic communication. Knowing that the information I am working with is accurate is crucial if I am to identify patterns, so even a seemingly insignificant site like El Portillo is important.

Having redistributed our gear and consulted the map, we start off along the passage that stretches forward into the dark. We can almost stand up straight here, so this part of the cave feels positively palatial, compared to the narrow entrance chute. We're headed for the red paintings that are supposed to be near the back of the cave, with a stop along the way to look for the engravings. I shine my light around as we walk—it's surprising how often I find new signs this way. Not this time, though. The interior rock of El Portillo is a yellowy-brown color, with a heavy buildup of dirt and a smearing of mud across large sections of the passage. This is definitely not the prettiest cave I've ever been in, and as far as we can tell from the geology, it looked pretty much the same during the Ice Age when those early artists ventured in.

We walk along in single file, our boots making sucking sounds in the mud. The sounds echo off the walls, and I notice that the ceiling is starting to get low again. Of course. Gustavo was here only one other time prior to today, as part of his orientation, and apparently El Portillo was just as unpleasant that time around. On that occasion they were unable to find any imagery other than the dots, and the map wasn't even terribly accurate about the cave's layout. With those words of encouragement, and the ceiling sloping sharply toward the floor in front of us, it was time to lie back down in the mud.

We scoured the walls for the engravings and other mysterious red signs, using all the tricks at our disposal, but we were only able to find the two red dots. In all likelihood, the other images were never there in the first place. Sometimes natural cracks in the rock or different-colored mineral pockets can masquerade as images, especially in low light, and that could be what the first archaeologist saw. Most of the time I am adding to the inventories, not subtracting, so this was actually a fairly unusual situation for us. Dillon and I have found new signs, or rediscovered missing ones (i.e., they'd initially been identified but no one had found them since), at over 75 percent of the sites we have visited. Some of these discoveries have been thrilling and surprising, but El Portillo did not challenge our existing knowledge.

I contemplate all of this as I am lying flat on my back in the mud once again, my nose almost scraping the low ceiling, on our way back from photographing the dots, which were located in a very small side chamber. I dig my heels in to get traction and inch my way forward using my fingers to grasp at little outcroppings above my head. After this, we have only to navigate the vertical passageway back to the upper level and we will be out.

When we emerge into the sunlight, Dillon and I are both so encrusted with mud that we can't help but laugh. Gustavo is apologetic that we have just spent almost three hours sliding through mud for the sake of a couple of red dots, but I assure him it was time well spent, since confirming the contents of these Ice Age sites is precisely why I am here. When doing research, even negative results are important. Now I can update my database.

The two dots were quite interesting in their own way. Rather than being painted in the typical red or black colors we usually see at sites across Spain and elsewhere in Europe, these were made using a distinct shade of mineral iron oxide (ochre) pigment that was much closer to pink than to red. This particular color seems to have become quite popular during the later millennia of the Ice Age in the region—maybe pink was the new red?—and it ties El Portillo in to the larger body of art in Cantabria. I often wonder what compelled these people to make this hazardous and rather soggy journey underground, with only the aid of a torch or oil lamp. What was it about this cave that made it worth it, especially if they did little more than paint two red dots?1

These are the kinds of questions that kept me crawling through the mud in passageways deep under the earth over the two-year span of this project. And, luckily, not every site was as devoid of symbols as El Portillo. In fact, we had the opposite experience the following year, not far down the coast, at the site of Cudon. The entrance to this cave happens to be right in the town of Cudon—it felt funny to be trekking along a civilized road with all our gear before entering a gated grass square in the middle of a residential neighborhood. The entrance to Cudon is much more inviting than El Portillo's—a short climb down from street level brings you to a wide cave mouth framed by bushes and trees that have taken up residence outside the opening.

The first art you find is in daylight—a long row of large red dots, each about three inches across, running the length of a wall not far from the entrance. This cave complex was carved out by an ancient underground river, so the passageways tend to be tall and wide with curving ceilings, a bit like an old subway tunnel. Since this cave is very accessible, modern graffiti can be seen here and there along the walls as we move deeper into the cave. It is a four-hundred-yard walk to the next Ice Age image—a single negative handprint in that same pink shade that we saw at El Portillo. This hand is located on the left-hand wall just where the floor begins to descend and the passageway opens up into a large chamber with a forty-foot ceiling. We have to thread our way between deep cracks in the floor and around massive blocks of rock—evidence of an ancient ceiling collapse. We have trouble at first trying to find the curving row of red dots that is supposed to be in this chamber, but after a bit of searching and climbing around we manage to locate them. According to the official inventory, we have now found all the documented art.

Gustavo is with us again today, and he offers to take us to an area about 150 yards farther in, to a passageway where there are said to be a few more traces of red paint. Of course I'm happy to go check them out. As we move beyond the large chamber, the passageway starts to narrow and the ceiling begins to angle downward. Before long we're crawling across a floor of hardened calcite topped with a thin layer of old river silt—not a big deal for a few minutes, but it does start to get uncomfortable when you're crawling almost the length of a football field this way. We soon get to the section of the cave where the traces are supposed to be, and, sure enough, on the low ceiling is a set of three elongated dots that look like they were made by pressing paint-covered fingertips to the rock's surface. And just up and to the left is another pair of these marks.

As Dillon photographed them, I ran one of our lights around the passageway ahead. And that's when I saw even more red dots, similar in style to what we'd just found. These were grouped around hollows in the ceiling, and they trailed off into the distance as far as my light could reach (see fig. 1.1). Over the next few hours we worked our way along this passageway, stopping to document the red dots and a few accompanying red lines as we found them. The ceiling continued to slope downward until we finally hit a point where it was too low for Dillon to achieve focus with the lens on his DSLR camera (even with him lying flat on his back on the cave floor, the end of the lens was almost scraping the rock above). But the trail of red dots continued along the ceiling, and so I carried on, crawling military-style, with a simple point-and-shoot camera we'd brought for just this kind of situation. Those dots continued all the way to the very back of the cave, at which point I was over a third of a mile from the entrance.

As at El Portillo, I wondered what prompted people to venture so far underground just to make a few marks. The size of the passage hasn't changed much since Paleolithic times, and yet Ice Age people braved the dark depths of Cudon to leave behind these little red dots. They must have been important to those who made them. This is what fascinates me.

1.1. Pairs of dots, Cudon, Spain. Found on the ceiling deep within the cave, these pairs of red dots were likely created by the artist pressing a paint-covered fingertip to the rock. Many of these markings appear around the edges of cracks or hollows such as the one seen in this photo. PHOTO BY D. VON PETZINGER.

To date, Dillon and I have documented the geometric paintings and engravings at fifty-two rock art sites across Europe, spanning seven regions in four countries, and ranging in age from the oldest art in the world, at 40,800 years old, to caves bearing witness to the end of this way of life 10,000 years ago. In each case my objective was to confirm what was there—and what wasn't.

With this information, I can now probe at the heart of the matter, the questions that underlie all my studies: When did we become us? At what point did those clever tool-making ancestors of ours make the final leap to having fully modern minds? How did we get from there to here? Today we shape the world around us to a degree that has never been seen before. We use tools and medicine to protect ourselves from natural hazards, and technology, mathematics, and science to solve problems and overcome all manner of obstacles. We've used these skills to investigate our own history and to travel to space. And at the base of all these achievements we find language and creativity—both of them driven by the capacity to think and communicate with symbols. Without language and creativity, none of what we have accomplished would have been possible. This book is about the beginning of that journey.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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